



# New Visions in Ireland in 1948: Clann na Poblachta and Our Country

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Julien Guillaumond

New Visions in Ireland in 1948: Clann na Poblachta and *Our Country*<sup>i</sup>

On 4 February 1948, a General Election was held in Ireland resulting in a change of government. A coalition of smaller parties with Clann na Poblachta, Clann na Talmhan, Fine Gael, some Independents, Labour and National Labour formed the new government, a change the *Irish Independent* on 19 February 1948 praised as being ‘for the good of all sections’ of society and as a landmark in Irish politics.<sup>ii</sup>

Various elements coalesced to make this electoral campaign and Clann na Poblachta’s performance of particular interest. Among them, the special provisions of the Emergency which were still being felt in 1947-48 with the rationing of or simply the lack of essential foodstuff, the shortages of raw materials for industry, the failure of the government to curb inflation, the rise in the cost of living while wages were low, high emigration and a high level of unemployment. A bitter teachers’ strike, two corruption scandals affecting the government and above all, as Maurice Manning<sup>iii</sup> has remarked, a sense of boredom after 16 years of Fianna Fáil government reinforced the general discontent. Furthermore, as J.A. Murphy has pointed out<sup>iv</sup>, Ireland was no exception to a need for change, so characteristic of the post-war mood elsewhere in Europe. Appealing to various sections of the community with its catchphrase - ‘Put Them Out’<sup>v</sup>-, ready to try out modern techniques of political communication<sup>vi</sup>, and with the other parties in disarray, Clann na Poblachta, a party founded by former republicans in July 1946, quickly came to be seen at that time as a viable alternative to Fianna Fáil.

The period covered by this paper will range from the creation of Clann na Poblachta in 1946 to the outcome of the 1947-8 campaign. In the first part, we will focus on Clann na Poblachta and *Our Country*, a documentary film commissioned by Clann na Poblachta in November 1947, in relation to the term ‘vision’. The explicit

reference to the term by one of the commentators in the film, its wide use over the period in the party's electoral literature and speeches, and the active viewing itself, all contribute to render the choice of the term 'vision' relevant to determine to what extent Clann na Poblachta and *Our Country* can be considered as new visions in Ireland in 1948. Then, on the basis of a study of the film, its objectives and TV interviews of the party leader and the film directors, the second part will argue that *Our Country* goes beyond its avowed aim of providing Irish audiences with an impartial documented vision of their country and becomes instead an illustration of a political programme, thus making it an electoral manifesto in visual form, the first of the sort in Ireland<sup>vii</sup>.

### **Clann na Poblachta in 1947-8: a new vision for Irish society**

For the 1948 General Election, Clann na Poblachta was a new party in both senses of the term: first of all, it was composed of young men<sup>viii</sup> - Seán MacBride, the party leader and future Minister for External Affairs was 44, while Noel Browne was 33 when he became Minister for Health<sup>ix</sup>; secondly, although it had fought three by-elections, it had not yet had the experience of a national campaign<sup>x</sup>. As a new party, Clann na Poblachta justified its existence by a shift in emphasis in its electoral discourse. It intended to break away from the Treaty and Civil War conflict, a new approach Seán MacBride summarised in *The Clann* stating that his party was '... the first real attempt which has been made since the Civil War to raise national affairs out of the rut of party politics and recriminations.'<sup>xi</sup> Justifying a new approach takes on its full significance in the course of an electoral campaign in order to gather a strong and determined electorate but it also becomes relevant when associated with the term 'vision' which stresses the existence of a project and asserts the party's capacity and knowledge to plan for the future when in government. Such a link between the party's

new approach and the term ‘vision’ can be seen in a publicity text appearing in the newspapers on polling day for the three by-elections:

‘Instead of flag-waving, “national records”, and personalities, what is needed is a policy based upon realities. Instead of recriminations and self-glorification based upon past events, the need is vision and planning for the future.’<sup>xii</sup>

Clann na Poblachta’s new vision for the future of Ireland lies ultimately in its electoral programme that formulates its project for society. Patrick Lynch remarked that it was inevitable that opposition parties would present programmes critical of the government<sup>xiii</sup>, and in that case, present themselves as carrying a new vision for the country. Clann na Poblachta’s programme addressed social and economic problems without forgetting an anti-partition stance. On 26 January 1948, Seán MacBride recalled his party’s electoral programme in the *Irish Independent*<sup>xiv</sup> before polling day. Pointing to Ireland’s ‘urgent problems’ such as the decline of population, the lower marriage rate and the high death-rate from tuberculosis compared to the Six Counties, and stressing the ‘... gross mismanagement of our own affairs ...’, he proposed ‘... a policy of full production and employment, based on the development of our national resources and backed by our national credit.’ The programme also contained provisions for the decrease in the cost of living and its social policy promised to implement a basic minimum wage coupled with a comprehensive scheme of social security for those ‘... unable to work through illness, old age or family duties.’<sup>xv</sup> It also contained a housing policy to deal with the bad living conditions of the Dublin slums and proposed a complete reform of the health services with the provision of sanatoria for TB patients. All those policies would be financed by the repatriation of sterling assets held for instance in British banks. Clann na Poblachta had also an educational policy proposing the raising of the school leaving age, the provision of free secondary and university education, and a cultural policy

which included the creation of a national theatre, the development of the Irish language and – interestingly – the creation of a film industry: ‘The use of films for educational purposes and for making Irish attractive and popular as a spoken language is visualised.’ In terms of all-Ireland politics, the party looked to the future reunification of the 32 counties.<sup>xvi</sup>

### ***Our Country as a new vision of Irish society***

*Our Country* was directed by Liam O Laoghaire<sup>xvii</sup> and Brendan Stafford and produced by Irish Civic Films, the company they had founded. The shooting was completed in a week in a ‘... very dull November’<sup>xviii</sup>. O Laoghaire also wrote the script while Stafford was cameraman and editor<sup>xix</sup>. Released early 1948, the film is 8 minutes long and was shot in the documentary style, the sound being added later in a studio in London.<sup>xx</sup>

*Our Country* can be considered as a new vision of Irish society in 1948 as it intended to offer Irish audiences a view of their country through the medium of the documentary film. Writing to Irish cinemas<sup>xxi</sup> on 7 January 1948 on behalf of Irish Civic Films to announce its release, Liam O Laoghaire appealed to the booking manager stressing that the film was an Irish film and the first of its kind to be made in Ireland. It was also ‘... directed and photographed by Brendan Stafford, the brilliant young Irish Director of Documentary films’ and it aimed at creating

‘... an intelligent and informed democracy. The method of presentation is in every way calculated to provide an entertaining and instructive film, free of narrow party bias.’

According to O Laoghaire, the objective of *Our Country* was to inform the public while offering Irish audiences a vision of their country. That was emphasised in the opening lines of the commentary<sup>xxii</sup> and in the title, both inviting the audience as viewers and as concerned citizens<sup>xxiii</sup> to question themselves about Ireland. The film

passed the Irish Censorship Board on 12 January 1948<sup>xxiv</sup> and was classified as a documentary film, immediately getting a general certificate with the mention ‘educational’.

Through a series of shots, *Our Country* offers a depiction of Ireland in 1948. It opened with Noel Hartnett, a person well-known to Irish radio listeners<sup>xxv</sup>, who acted as a narrator, seated on a chair, slowly swivelling around to face the camera, and proceeding to give the audience a view of ‘their country’. All the problems facing Ireland were presented revealing a new vision of the country, something with which Irish audiences were familiar but which had not been represented on screen before. Thus, the audience could see emigration and rural depopulation, unemployment, housing conditions and the slums, the scarcity of food and its high prices. A doctor spoke of the scourge of tuberculosis and the mortality rate while a third commentator delivered the final message calling for the need for vision.<sup>xxvi</sup>

In one article in *The Clann* published after the General Election, Liam O Laoghaire described his method and his aims for *Our Country*. Because the cinema is ‘... the most powerful weapon we can use ...’ and because it ‘... is the ideal means of disseminating essential public information’, O Laoghaire aimed at giving ‘... the facts about life in Ireland to our people.’<sup>xxvii</sup> That objective finds some echoes in a previous article written in 1943 on the meaning of the documentary film in which he explained that the aim of the documentary film was to reproduce reality.<sup>xxviii</sup> However, the presence in *Our Country* of commentators from Clann na Poblachta<sup>xxix</sup> and O Laoghaire’s insistence on giving ‘facts’ and reproducing ‘reality’ in a documentary film allow one to question the real intentions and purposes of the film around the term ‘vision’. What vision of the country did the film offer through its presentation of facts? And, in a context of an electoral campaign, what vision for the country did it seem to espouse?

## **Intentionally Transcending the vision: *Our Country* as an electoral manifesto in visual form**

O Laoghaire's method for *Our Country* was 'simple'. The film would show facts such as slums or emigration<sup>xxx</sup>, a version with which Stafford concurs when he later declared that the film aimed at showing the truth about what was happening in Ireland:

'We didn't fake a thing in that film, if we showed barefooted newsboys – we didn't ask them to take their boots off for the film. ... we showed exactly what it was, and those tenement houses were there unfortunately, and I don't know why the Government took umbrage about it, because after all we were only telling them the truth.'<sup>xxxi</sup>

However, when one remembers that *Our Country* had been commissioned by Clann na Poblachta<sup>xxxii</sup>, that it was distributed free of charge until the eve of the General Election<sup>xxxiii</sup> and that O Laoghaire was an enthusiastic member of the party<sup>xxxiv</sup>, the vision of the country it offers becomes questionable. And when Brendan Stafford explained retrospectively that the shooting in general '... helped to put across Seán MacBride's message'<sup>xxxv</sup>, the representation offered turns into a distorted vision of Ireland and is thus biased, something which Seán MacEntee from the Fianna Fáil government ferociously denounced.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

An analysis of both the internal structure<sup>xxxvii</sup> of *Our Country* and its presentation of 'facts', in parallel with an examination of Clann na Poblachta's electoral programme, shows that, as the film progresses, it echoes the party platform point by point. Consequently, as all those points gradually find a visual representation, *Our Country* becomes the medium that carries the party platform, thus espousing Clann na Poblachta's vision for Ireland. This is further reinforced in the film by one of its opening sentences - 'We've had twenty-five years of native

government in this part of the country, how have we utilised it?’ – challenging the previous governments, and one of its concluding sentences – ‘... the need is vision, enthusiasm and a plan for the future’ – both enclosing the commentaries and echoing the party’s approach to break with the past. Focusing ultimately on the showings of the film helps to reinforce the previous argument. Due to government censorship<sup>xxxviii</sup>, *Our Country* was shown mostly on gable walls or on the hustings<sup>xxxix</sup> with a portable projector, revealing its true nature: an electoral manifesto in visual form, the first of the sort in Ireland.

Under the guise of a documentary film lies a very subtle and clever piece of work, implicitly criticising former governments’ visions of and for Ireland when the country was looking for alternatives, all that without naming any political parties, least of all Clann na Poblachta. To what extent *Our Country* influenced the results of the General Elections seems hard to tell, but in Seán MacBride’s words:

‘The film was very useful during the campaign and had a tremendous amount of influence on the campaign ... I think it was undoubtedly a factor in enabling us ... not win the elections but to get the number of seats we did get at the time.’<sup>xl</sup>



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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> For this paper, I would like to express my gratitude to Mr Robert Monks, ‘Liam O Laoghaire’ archivist in the National Library of Ireland who kindly agreed to an interview and the staff of the Irish Film Institute and the Archives department of University College, Dublin (UCDAD).

<sup>ii</sup> McGilligan papers, UCDAD, P35c/133. *Irish Independent*, 19 February 1948. This file contains newspaper cuttings on the campaign. See also David McCullagh, *A Makeshift Majority: the First Inter-Party Government, 1948-51* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1998), p.7.

<sup>iii</sup> Manning, Maurice, *Irish Political Parties. An Introduction* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1972), p.23.

<sup>iv</sup> John A. Murphy, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1989), pp.116-17.

<sup>v</sup> J.A. Murphy, ‘Put Them Out! Parties and Elections, 1948-1969’, in *Ireland 1945-70*, edited by J.J. Lee (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1970), pp.1-15. See also David McCullagh, *A Makeshift Majority*; Eithne MacDermott, *Clann na Poblachta* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998); Kevin Rafter, *The Clann. The Story of Clann na Poblachta* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1996). See also the slogan appearing in *The Clann* – the newspaper of Clann na Poblachta - on 1 February 1948, ‘Put Them Out. Vote Clann na Poblachta’, ironically the same slogan Fianna Fáil used to oust Cumann na nGaedheal in 1932.

<sup>vi</sup> MacDermott, *Clann na Poblachta*, p.55 and p.57, talks of Noel Hartnett’s influence in that matter and mentions an LP record of MacBride’s speech. See also an advertisement in *The Clann*, 1 February 1948, for speeches by ‘Seán MacBride and

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Noel Hartnett available on records (4 sides).’ See also *Department of Taoiseach*, file S 14204 which contains a brief correspondence between MacBride and Maurice Moynihan, secretary of the Taoiseach, mid January 1948, on the possibility of using Radio Éireann for political broadcasts.

vii Both Noel Browne and Seán MacBride agree on this. See: ‘The War Years and After’ in *Memories in Focus*, 6 part series produced by Peter Canning for RTÉ, 1995, part 3.

viii See ‘Careers of Ministers’, *Irish Independent*, 19 February 1948.

ix Henri Boylan, *A Dictionary of Irish Biography*, third edition (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1998).

x The party contested three by-elections on 30 October 1947 and got two seats in the Dáil, Seán MacBride for Co. Dublin and Patrick Kinane for Co. Tipperary, causing a ‘considerable shock’ to the Fianna Fáil headquarters, *Irish Times*, 1 November 1947. Co. Waterford was the third constituency.

xi *The Clann*, 14 December 1947. See also *Irish Independent*, 26 January 1948, ‘Party Leaders on their Programmes: Clann na Poblachta by Seán MacBride’, no. 2.

xii *Irish Times*, 29 October 1947.

xiii Patrick Lynch, ‘The Irish Economy since the War’, in *Ireland in the War Years and After 1939-51*, edited by Kevin B. Nowlan and T. Desmond Williams (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1969), p.186.

xiv *Irish Independent*, ‘Party Leaders on their Programmes: Clann na Poblachta’, 26 January 1948.

xv Those latter proposals were based on the recommendations made by the Bishop of Clonfert, Dr John Dignan, in *Social Security. Outlines of a Scheme of National Health Insurance* published in 1945. The report called for a complete reform of the Irish health insurance services as well as for the provision of social services on the

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lines of Catholic social teachings but was dismissed by the Fianna Fáil government.

See also Anthony J. Jordan, *Seán MacBride. A Biography* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1983), pp.92-3 on the adoption of Dignan's plan by Clann na Poblachta, and Adrian Kelly, *Social Security in Independent Ireland, 1922-52*, PhD Thesis, Dep. of Modern History, Maynooth, 1995.

<sup>xvi</sup> See *The Clann* for several articles explaining that reunification would come if the south of Ireland could catch up with the north in terms of social provisions.

<sup>xvii</sup> Or O'Leary.

<sup>xviii</sup> Liam O Laoghaire and Brendan Stafford in 'The War Years and After', 3. Technical and financial reasons can account for the quick shooting, among them, a November light and misty weather only allowing shooting between 10 am to 4 pm, and the absence of filming equipment in Ireland which required that it had to be rented in London. Moreover, the General Election was soon approaching.

<sup>xix</sup> National Library of Ireland, *Cinema Ireland: A Database of Irish Films and Filmmakers 1896-1986* (Dublin: National Library of Ireland, n.d.).

<sup>xx</sup> Noel Browne recalled in his autobiography how he had travelled to London with Noel Hartnett and Seán MacBride to record their three voices, and where the film was then edited, *Against the Tide* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1986), p.99. As Mr Monks also kindly explained to me, sound taking called for special equipment and a greatly increased crew at the time.

<sup>xxi</sup> MacEntee papers, UCDA, P67/379 (1), Letter from Irish Civic Films to Booking Managers, 7 January 1948, signed by Liam O Laoghaire.

<sup>xxii</sup> 'Hello, do you ever think as much as you should about things here in Ireland? ... This is your country, our country.'

<sup>xxiii</sup> Twice the expression 'your concern' is mentioned in the film.

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<sup>xxiv</sup> All films, even the documentaries for instance made by Pathé, had to go through the Irish Censor. The record on *Our Country* is to be found under the number 22363 in the National Archives, *Register of Films Censored, N-Z, 1938-1950*, réf. No. 98/26/4 and *Record of Films Censored Books*, covering dates June 1947 - 6 July 1948, réf. No. 98/27/25.

<sup>xxv</sup> He ran quiz programmes on Radio Éireann before he was sacked by de Valera, See Browne, *Against the Tide*, p.91.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Interestingly, neither the names of Browne or MacBride are written in the synopsis of *Our Country*; only Hartnett's name is, See MacEntee papers, UCDA, P67/379 (2), Synopsis of *Our Country* by Irish Civic Films. Moreover, only Browne is introduced when he is about to address the audience: 'Here is Dr Noel Browne whose job it is to fight TB.'

<sup>xxvii</sup> Liam O Laoghaire, 'The Case History of a Film' in *The Clann*, 15 and 22 February 1948 (Dublin: Clann na Poblachta), pp.2-4. My thanks again are due to Mr Monks for pointing out that article to me.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Liam O Laoghaire, 'Documentary Film', in *Irish Cinema Handbook* (Dublin: The Parkside Press Ltd, 1943), pp.107-10.

<sup>xxix</sup> Browne, Hartnett and MacBride were all three candidates of Clann na Poblachta. Noel Hartnett was also Director of Elections.

<sup>xxx</sup> O Laoghaire, 'The Case History of a Film'.

<sup>xxxi</sup> 'The War Years and After', 3.

<sup>xxxii</sup> O Laoghaire, 'The Case History of a Film', recalled Clann na Poblachta's aims when he was asked to make the film: 'Clann na Poblachta wanted a film on Civic Responsibilities to bring before the electorate the need for a choice of representatives based not on personal enthusiasm or emotion but on a logical examination of facts.'

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<sup>xxxiii</sup> MacEntee papers, UCDAD, P67/379 (1), Letter from Irish Civic Films.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Thanks to Mr Monks for that information.

<sup>xxxv</sup> *At The Cinema Palace, Liam O'Leary*, produced and directed by Donald Taylor Black, Poolbeg Production, 1983.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Eithne MacDermott, *Clann na Poblachta*, gives a full account of the government's censorship of the film.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> For a more thorough analysis on *Our Country*, a study based on semiotics would be necessary to explore the film technique and its 'mise en scene', aspects which could not be covered here due to lack of space.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Late 1947, the Fianna Fáil government introduced a supplementary budget which included an entertainment tax that soon became inimical to cinema owners as it called for a tax-increase on cinema tickets. One way to protest was to show the film in some independent cinemas. 'Fianna Fáil was very unpopular with the film trade at that time, because of high taxes, and one thing and another, and they were only too glad to show this particular film and distribute it for us', O Laoghaire in 'The War Years and After', 3.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Browne, *Against the Tide*; O Laoghaire, 'The Way Years and After', 3; Robert Monks, 'Introductory Remarks to the Showing of *Portrait of Dublin*', *Dublin Film Festival, Tribute to Liam O'Leary*.

<sup>xl</sup> *At The Cinema Palace, Liam O'Leary*, 1983.